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VOCATIONAL AND MORAL GUIDANCE THROUGH ENGLISH COMPOSITION

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“To teach men how they may grow independently and for themselves is, perhaps, the greatest service that one man can do for another.”—Jowett.

Every pupil who enters the high school presents himself as a candidate for some successful career in life. He may have little or no conception of what that means, but such is the faith of the pupil and his parents that they expect the school will in some way secure for him the much coveted prize. That the schools fail to meet this expectation is evident on all sides. A diploma does not necessarily assure one happiness or wealth: all about us are educated misfits—round pegs in square holes. Discouragement, failure, and crime are the natural results of misguided lives. We have failed to teach men how they may grow independently and for themselves toward a successful career in that calling for which they may be best fitted by nature and preparation.

Realizing the need of directing the work of our pupils along this line, a plan for vocational and moral guidance was originated in the Central High School of Grand Rapids, Mich., about four years ago. The word “guidance” has in this connection a special significance. From the vocational point of view, it means the gradual unfolding of the pupil’s better understanding of himself; it means the opening of his eyes to the broad field of opportunity in the world; it means a selection of and a preparation for his own best field of service as a social being. From the moral standpoint,

the idea of "guidance" is peculiarly essential in the development of the pupil. Ethical instruction that merely informs the brain does not necessarily produce better character. It is of most value when it is in some way applied to the actual thinking and acting of the pupil. In this connection guidance means the better understanding of one's own character; it means an awakening of the moral consciousness that will lead the pupil to emulate the character of the good and great who have gone before; it means a conception of oneself as a social being in some future occupation, and from this viewpoint, the appreciation of one's duty and obligation toward his business associates, toward his neighbors, and toward the law.

In our attempt to aid our pupils to choose their course of study with a degree of wisdom, to give an aim and purpose to their work, and to plan definitely for some vocation for which they seem best fitted, we outlined a plan which we called "Vocational Guidance." It is not often that in an attempt to find a solution for one problem one happens to work out a scheme that proves to be a very satisfactory solution of three perplexing questions. Such, however, was the result in this case, for we found that the plan not only tended to give vocational aim to the high-school course, but, as the work progressed, it developed into a very practical course of moral instruction. Moreover, now that it has been in operation for over three years, we find that it has solved some of the problems of English composition. It is from this point of view that I wish to bring to the attention of teachers of English the opportunity that is theirs, while imparting the technical and literary sides of the subject, to improve their results and at the same time to guide their pupils in systematic courses of instruction that tend to prevent many misfits in life, and that also may be the means of raising the standard of moral efficiency in the coming generation.

The writing of themes by pupils of secondary school age is not exceedingly popular, particularly with the red-blooded, matter-of-fact boy. Work for work's sake does not appeal very strongly to him. The average exercise in English composition upon subjects of more or less questionable interest may have its disciplinary value, but it too often lacks the added value of originality or life

interest, and the themes rarely leave a lasting impress upon the writer. Each study in the curriculum of today must meet the demand of a very practical civilization. Its cultural value, while fully recognized and appreciated, is not all-sufficient, but to this must be added a practical motive. English composition is no exception to this rule. It may, however, be given a motive that is in the highest sense practical by connecting it with the broader purpose of vocational guidance. Our attempt to accomplish this is what I wish to outline in this paper.

In the Central High School of Grand Rapids, the course in English continues throughout the entire four years. In each grade and class the work is divided into three parts, viz., grammar or rhetoric, composition, and literature. The exercises in composition are both oral and written. Not less than three, and often more, of these exercises are based upon the work in vocational and moral guidance. Such exercises do not supplant all other theme work, for not more than one-fourth of the time given to composition is usually taken for this study. A general outline by semesters is followed, but each teacher is expected to use her own judgment and originality in carrying out the detail of the plan.

FIRST-YEAR TOPIC, ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS IN LIFE

The work of vocational guidance really begins in the eighth grade with the discussion of the value of an education, the reasons for going to high school, and the choice of a course of study in the high school. However, I shall confine my description to the scheme as carried out in the high school. The topic for the first year or ninth grade is called "Elements of Success in Life." The vocational work of the first semester of this year is devoted to the study of the lives of successful men and women for the purpose of discovering the habits of life and work that have contributed to their success. Lists of these characteristics are made and they form the basis for studying the fundamental elements of success. For the pupil to work out for himself these principles of life from a study of the lives of men of all ages, and as a class exercise to make this deduction from such a comparative study, makes a lasting impression of the eternal verity of human virtue. A comparison of the

opportunities and difficulties of these men and women with those of the pupil forms another very beneficial theme. Each teacher that has a real interest in the plan will develop from this suggestion ideas for both the oral and the written work.

The second semester of this first year is devoted to self-analysis. "Know thyself" is the principal theme. This is possibly the most helpful of all the work when handled wisely. The pupil should not be permitted to dwell upon his own weaknesses or faults, but should be guided in finding his strong points. Individual characteristics such as temperaments, likes and dislikes, experience, special aptitudes, etc., should be brought out in confidential papers to be read and discussed in private with the instructor. This gives the teacher a wonderful opportunity to enter into the great work of guiding and molding lives. By being inspired with confidence in his own ability to do and be something worth while, the pupil can be given a new start that will be made evident in all that he does. For class exercises very interesting topics that will help the pupil to gain an estimate of his present worth may be suggested: "How I could earn my living if I left school now"; "Some employments of boys and girls of my own age"; "Personal adventures"; "The business asset of personal appearance, good manners, cheerfulness," etc.

SECOND-YEAR TOPIC, THE WORLD'S WORK

The first semester of the second year, or tenth grade, is occupied with a survey of the world's work in general. The object of the study is to broaden the pupil's vision of the possible vocations beyond the narrow field of his previous experience. Reports on various occupations for men and for women are read and discussed in class. A card index has been prepared by one class, listing about seventeen hundred different vocations. Such a catalogue, with references and data regarding the status of the particular vocation in the locality, is a very valuable adjunct to the school library. Few pupils of high-school age have any conception of the very large field of opportunity that lies before them. It is quite essential that during their high-school course and before they have gone too far, they should get this wider view of life. By these investi-

gations a fairly good idea can be gained of the desirability or undesirability of certain vocations. Wages, chance for advancement, health conditions, future growth of the business or profession, and other considerations provide an abundance of material for oral composition.

"How to Choose a Vocation."—The topic, "How to Choose a Vocation," which is made the basis of the second half of the tenth-grade themes, appeals strongly to the pupils. By this time all are vitally concerned with the problem. They now need careful guidance in an attempt to narrow down the number of attractive vocations to the one or two fields which their own peculiar fitness seems to indicate are best. Here must be applied all that has been developed before. The pupil must be led to examine himself again as to his natural ability and tastes; he must make a survey of his opportunities and possibilities, and then must make a careful application of these to the call to service. This is the crowning opportunity of the true teacher to reveal to his students some appealing career, some compelling purpose that will be to them what teaching is to him. An appreciation of the great law of service should be made the ideal of the discussion and theme work in this course. By a possible process of elimination the pupil may be led to decide upon some vocation or some special line of future activity for which he is now to make definite preparation.

THIRD-YEAR TOPIC, PREPARATION FOR LIFE'S WORK

The beginning of the third year in the high school is the critical time in the life of every student. It is here that he must know whether he is to elect the subjects that will prepare him to meet the college-entrance requirements, or those that will best fit him for a commercial or industrial career. It is also at this period that a large number drop out because they have no real purpose in attending school and are tempted to take the first apparently good position that offers itself. If the work of the previous semester has been fairly successful it will be evident in the interest with which the pupils undertake to plan the steps by which they may reach the goal of their ambitions. For this purpose it is quite essential that the school library be well equipped with catalogues

of all kinds of schools and colleges and with such material as may be obtained relating to commercial and industrial conditions.

Business and professional ethics.—By the last half of the third year the pupil either has chosen a definite vocation or has a general field toward which he is working. He can profitably take time here to consider the ethics of his calling. Interesting debates can be developed out of the problems of modern business methods. Each profession has its peculiar code, which should be well understood by those thinking of entering it. The relation of employer and employee, rebating, promoting of stock companies, the moral responsibility of the professional man toward his client, and many other topics, will suggest themselves as valuable themes in this grade.

FOURTH-YEAR TOPIC, SOCIAL ETHICS

The individual and society, from the point of view of the chosen or assumed vocation, is the central thought running through the themes of the first semester of the senior year. Why should I, the professional or business man, be interested in the public schools, the slums, social settlements, the church, the Y.M.C.A., or other fields of social service? What do I owe to the community in which I live? How can I improve the moral conditions in my neighborhood? Other similar topics will also suggest themselves to the teacher who catches the spirit of the work.

During the second semester, the themes take the relation of the individual to the state from the same vocational point of view. The call for business and professional men in politics, or the "new patriotism" as described by Josiah Strong, sounds the keynote for the discussions. A few suggestive themes will indicate the trend of the written work as follows: My profession or my business and the law; The effect of a well-governed city upon business; Why should I be willing to pay taxes? What is meant by the "patriotism of peace"? This plan gives a concreteness to the discussion of social ethics that is very desirable. The impression is lasting and it is personal in its application.

This brief description of the course in vocational and moral guidance is but an outline of the portion of the scheme applied to

the department of English. Other departments are co-operating where possible, and the teachers known as grade principals or session room teachers are trained advisers in the work of vocational counseling. The principal of the school is the chief counselor and a vocational bureau of business men complete the broader plan.

To give any tangible report of the results of our four years of effort in this work is very difficult. They are more intellectual and spiritual than material and cannot be estimated by statistics. We no longer consider vocational guidance as an experiment but as an established part of the curriculum. One must mingle with the pupils and the teachers to appreciate the spirit of the institution. The work has at least eliminated a large proportion of the drifters who were the troublesome element of the school; it has reduced discipline to an almost negligible quantity. While each pupil may not have chosen a definite career, he is at least taking life more seriously; he is making the attempt to find that thing which he must do if he is to fulfil his ideals.

TESTIMONY OF PUPILS

In order that I might bring you the testimony of the pupils themselves who have just completed the course, I asked them to answer briefly and frankly the question, "How has this vocational study helped you?" They were assured that there was nothing personal to me in the question and that all that I desired was a truthful statement of the impression that they had received from the work. A few characteristic replies will indicate the general attitude:

"It broadened my view of things that I could do in the world."

"It has made me realize the need of planning for a career."

"It has aided me chiefly in showing me what I ought not to do."

"It has given me a working plan for my daily tasks."

From the moral standpoint the following replies are significant:

"It has kept the thought of what I was to do when I finished school constantly before me, and I have studied harder and with greater purpose."

"The character of the study helped me most, as I realize that there are changes in my character that I must try to make."

"Never having had to think of earning my own living, I had not thought much about vocations; but when compelled to write on one, I began to think,

and I realized how little I was equal to doing anything. I am seeing life in a different light now, and I am more considerate of others because I can put myself in their places."

TESTIMONY OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

The twelve teachers of English in the Central High School of Grand Rapids are enthusiastic over the results of the work in their classes. From their reports I have selected a few statements as to the effect in composition:

"The vocational themes insure originality of composition and provide subjects of vital everyday interest."

"The students now feel that the study of English is of practical value."

"The pupils enter the advanced classes with an uncommon interest and earnestness of spirit."

"The themes are well adapted to the various forms of composition and we have seemed to get much more out of them than ever before."

The opinion of the teachers regarding the vocational value of the themes is indicated in the following expressions:

"It has undoubtedly prevented some misfits in the choice of vocations."

"It has stopped several of my pupils who were drifting."

"Even though it may not determine a pupil's actual vocation it adds inestimably to his outlook on life and his attitude toward work, and makes for bigger and better lives."

The moral sentiment can hardly be separated from the vocational. Each teacher is very positive of the ethical value of both the oral and written themes. They report:

"It gives an opportunity to use the pupil's ambition as a lever to lift him away from harmful habits and to strengthen his character."

"The pupils appreciate the fact that character counts in practical life."

"They give evidence of a higher sense of honor, a finer feeling for others and a better understanding of what is necessary to make good."

Perhaps the one bit of testimony that expresses more than all the rest is this: "It makes the teacher feel that she is doing more than teaching English; that she is having a share in the wonderful work of molding lives."

This last statement sounds the keynote of the entire plan. The demand for a practical course of moral instruction in the public schools and particularly in the high school has been urgent

for many years. It is not effective when taught as a course in formal ethics; it fails to reach those who need it most when made elective; it is not personal or practical when taught in the abstract; and it does not give time for growth when given as a single semester course. Through four years of composition work in the department of English, all of these difficulties are surmounted, and furthermore, the pupils are getting the moral training, not as such, but as a part of practical preparation for life. With the wide choice of subjects in the cosmopolitan high school, with the diversity of entrance requirements for technical schools and colleges, and with the need of a closer relationship between the public schools and the commercial and industrial community that supports them, comes this most positive demand. We are called upon to guide and prepare those who are to go out into the numerous ways in life in a manner that will eliminate the misfits and that will make for a greater efficiency in every vocation. In no department of the high school nor by any other means can these most vital problems be so satisfactorily solved as in the department of English, the great backbone of the American high-school curriculum. And best of all, in rendering this noble service, there comes in return the well-deserved reward of increased efficiency in the department itself.